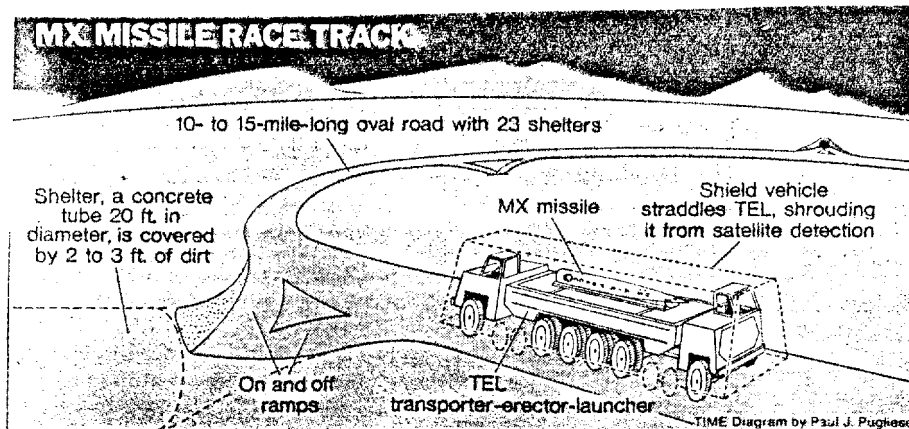


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## Move It or Lose It

*Or, how the Pentagon plans to protect its nuclear missiles*

If Pentagon planners get their way the valleys throughout Nevada and Utah will be dotted with 200 asphalt oval tracks, 20 ft. wide and 10 to 15 miles long. The "race tracks," as the Pentagon calls them, will be traveled at 5 m.p.h. by the largest military vehicle ever built, lugging the nation's most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile. Last week the race-track plan, projected to cost \$30 billion, was endorsed by a high-level Administration committee; Jimmy Carter's approval is expected later this month.

Deploying nuclear weapons on the oval tracks is intended to solve the most serious threat to the nation's land-based strategic arsenal: the possibility of a surprise Soviet attack obliterating nearly all of the 1,054 U.S. Minuteman and Titan ICBMs. Pentagon strategists have long believed that the best antidote to this vulnerability would be a mobile ICBM known as the MX. They had considered underground trenches, which proved vulnerable, and special planes, which proved very expensive.

The Pentagon's new proposal calls for 23 underground shelters to be connected by ramps to each track. Only one MX missile would be based on each oval. The missile would be moved from shelter to shelter by a TEL, for transporter-erector-launcher. Each one would be 180 ft. long, 13 ft. wide and 13.5 ft. high, roll on 24 huge tires and have a 3,250 h.p. engine. The total weight of a TEL and its missile would be 335 tons.

The critical moment would come when the TEL moved to the end of a ramp and stopped at a shelter entrance. There it could: 1) deposit an MX in the shelter; or 2) remove one; or 3) do neither, but deceptively remain at the entrance for the time it would take to load or unload a missile. To prevent Soviet spy satellites from detecting what was going on, the TEL's actions would be completely shrouded by the "shield vehicle," another truck that straddles the TEL much as a turtle is covered by its shell.

As an additional safeguard, every shelter will contain 96 tons of weights (about equal to the MX), which the TEL would pick up when it drops off a real missile. This would prevent Soviet sensors from discerning the change in the TEL's rumble that would be caused if it no longer carried a load. If the TEL suddenly seemed lighter, for instance, Moscow could conclude that it had deposited an MX at its last stop. The TEL would also carry equipment constantly emitting the same amount of gamma rays and heat as would be given off by an MX.

With such multideception, the Pentagon is confident that a significant number of MXs can survive a Soviet attack. Should the President give the order, the missiles could be launched within one minute from the shelters or from the TELs. Each shelter would have a device that could push a missile through its ceiling and raise it to a 50° firing angle. Spaced at about 6,000-ft. intervals, the shelters would be far enough apart so that a Soviet warhead that destroyed one of them probably would be too far away to seriously damage another. To be certain of knocking out 200 MX missiles, therefore, the Kremlin would have to fire warheads at all 4,600 shelters, which would so strain the capability of its arsenal that it would have few warheads left for anything else.

The race-track approach offers several advantages over competing MX basing proposals. For one thing, it would be relatively simple for the Soviets to verify U.S. compliance with the SALT accords because the shelter roofs could all be pulled back simultaneously to allow Soviet satellites to count the MXs. For another, not much land would be needed, and all of it already belongs to the Bureau of Land Management. Only the 2.5 acres surrounding each shelter would be cordoned off.

If Carter okays the race track and Congress gives its approval, which seems likely, the first MXs should start moving along the ovals by 1986.